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How the Trump Campaign Ran With Rumors About Pet-Eating Migrants—After Being Told They Weren't True

Springfield, Ohio, city officials were contacted by Vance's team and said the claims were baseless. It didn't matter and now the town is in chaos.

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SPRINGFIELD, Ohio—City Manager Bryan Heck fielded an unusual question at City Hall on the morning of Sept. 9, from a staff member of Republican vice presidential nominee JD Vance. The staffer called to ask if there was any truth to bizarre rumors about Haitian immigrants and pets in Springfield.

“He asked point-blank, ‘Are the rumors true of pets being taken and eaten?’” recalled Heck. “I told him no. There was no verifiable evidence or reports to show this was true. I told them these claims were baseless.”

By then, Vance had already posted about the rumors to his 1.9 million followers on X. Yet he kept the post up, and repeated an even more insistent version of

the claim the next morning.

That night, former President Donald Trump stood on a Philadelphia debate stage and shot the rumor into the stratosphere. “In Springfield, they’re eating the dogs,” he said to 67 million viewers. “The people that came in, they’re eating the cats. They’re eating, they’re eating, the pets of the people that live there. And this is what’s happening in this country.”

In an instant, the everyday struggles of a typical American city grappling with an influx of immigrants were transformed into a bombshell political message laser targeted at voters distressed by immigration.

It was the culmination of a spectacular collision of forces that thrust Springfield into the heart of the U.S. presidential election. Over the summer, outside neo-Nazi groups—which specialize in exploiting local controversy to foment outrage about migrants—had seized on a local controversy and fanned the narrative of pet-eating Haitians.

Then the Trump campaign blasted those rumors to the world—and kept pushing them even after they were exposed as lies. The Trump campaign continues to run hard at the controversy. Trump last Friday said he planned “large deportations” from Springfield—whose Haitian community is overwhelmingly in the country legally. Trump campaign surrogate Vivek Ramaswamy plans to host

a town hall in Springfield this Thursday. Vance said on Tuesday that Trump would like to visit Springfield, too, at some point.

Attempts to contain the damage in Springfield were quickly overwhelmed despite city leaders' racing from meeting to meeting trying to stem the tide. The Ohio state police were called in to protect local children as they returned to school. A security tower with cameras was erected outside City Hall. Thirty-six bomb threats had been logged as of Tuesday evening.

"It induces panic and fear and depletes resources," said Heck, the city manager. "We're living the danger that misinformation and created stories leads to."



Springfield Mayor Rob Rue outside City Hall this week. PHOTO: TANNER PEARSON FOR WSJ

"We have told those at the national level that they are speaking these things that are untrue," added

Springfield Mayor Rob Rue, a registered Republican. But he said claims have been “repeated and doubled down on.”

Vance insisted on CNN this past Sunday that he had firsthand accounts of the incidents from constituents, but the media had paid no attention to migrant problems in American cities “until Donald Trump and I started talking about cat memes.” He added, “If I have to create stories so that the American media actually pays attention to the suffering of the American people, then that’s what I’m going to do.”

Ripe for exploitation

Springfield was a community that had all the ingredients to be exploited in a close, fiercely fought national election.

It’s in the middle of the middle of the U.S., with a name so generically American it was used in the classic sitcoms “Father Knows Best” and “The Simpsons.” The town sprung up along the Old National Road, the first highway built by the federal government. From the beginning, it was a place of immigrants: first the Irish, who traveled the road westward in the early 1800s, then the Germans, who founded the town’s flagship Wittenberg University in the 1840s, and eventually a wave of Black Americans fleeing the South in the mid-20th century.

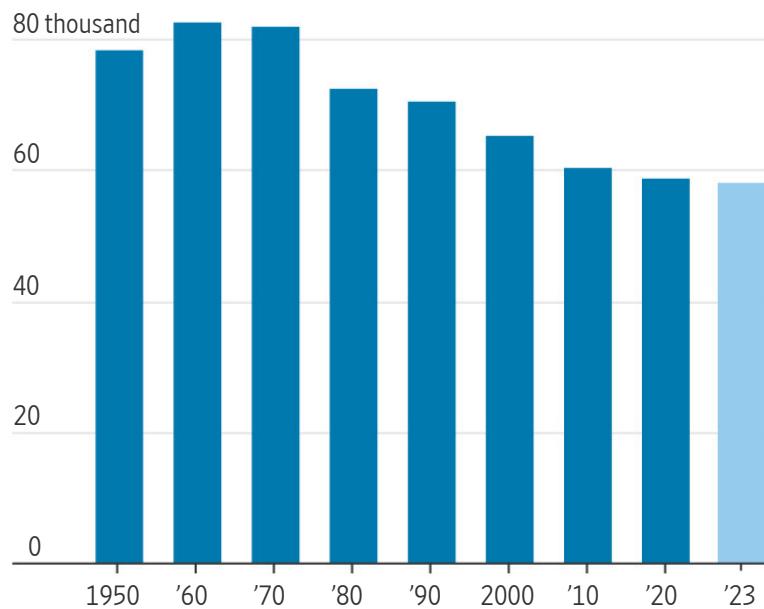


A U.S. flag is displayed in Springfield, which is in the middle of America, and long a destination for immigrants. PHOTO: LUKE SHARRETT/GETTY IMAGES

This recent wave of Haitian immigrants was initially welcomed. The town's fortunes had declined alongside those of the rest of the Rust Belt, with the population dropping from 83,000 in 1960 to 59,000 in 2020. The pandemic created a crunch in the available labor force as many workers stayed home out of choice or necessity, collecting stimulus checks.

Haitians were fleeing danger in their increasingly lawless country, particularly after the assassination of their president in 2021. In Springfield, they were welcomed by evangelical groups and employers alike. Friends and family members followed loved ones there.

Springfield, Ohio's population



Note: 2023 is an estimate

Source: U.S. Census Bureau

Estimates of the number of immigrants vary, but Republican Gov. Mike DeWine said Monday that roughly 15,000 Haitians immigrated to Springfield over the past four years. They were able to immigrate legally under a Biden administration policy granting Temporary Protected Status to Haitians as part of a program created by Congress in 1990 to protect immigrants from countries deemed too dangerous to return to.

The local economy boomed. Business owners said they were grateful to have workers eager to work long shifts and do what it took to meet production goals. New subdivisions sprung up in the cornfields outside town. New restaurants opened. The Haitian

flag flew at City Hall.

Growth came with growing pains. The number of non-native English speakers in the public schools quadrupled to more than 1,000 children. The local clinic and hospital were overwhelmed with people fleeing a country where healthcare had been scant. Traffic increased, as did frustration with drivers more accustomed with the chaotic streets of Port-au-Prince than the orderly grid of Springfield.

Then tragedy struck at the start of school in 2023. A minivan driven by a Haitian immigrant crashed into a school bus, injuring 20 children and killing Aiden Clark, who was thrown from a window. The man didn't have a driver's license that was valid in the U.S.



A bus crash that killed a child struck the community hard and set off tension. PHOTO: BILL LACKEY / THE SPRINGFIELD NEWS-SUN/ASSOCIATED PRESS

Aiden was memorialized in an obituary as a kid who loved gardening with his father, snuggling with his mother and playing with his siblings, and overall was “one of the most awesome and exceptional 11-year-olds in existence.”

His death brought out conflict about immigration. City commission meetings once dominated by zoning petitions became extended public comment sessions on immigration. Suspicions grew about who might be benefiting from the migrant wave.



Pastor Carl Ruby outside of Central Christian Church in Springfield. PHOTO: TANNER PEARSON FOR WSJ

After one city commission meeting, an evangelical

pastor named Carl Ruby, who ran an “immigrant integration” not-for-profit organization, sought out a local GOP leader who had criticized him online. Ruby said he shook the hand of Mark Sanders, who had become a leading critic in town of the influx of immigrants—and wouldn’t let go until he agreed to meet.

They met and drank coffee at Panera for an hour and a half. Ruby offered to share tax documents for his organization that would dispel rumors he was getting rich from his nonprofit. He also said he didn’t own rental properties or benefit from a local employment agency that has employed Haitians, as had been rumored.



Mark Sanders at his home. PHOTO: TANNER PEARSON FOR WSJ

Sanders, who has likened Ruby to a “coyote” who makes money from helping people cross into the U.S. illegally, agreed to take down some of his online posts but the two men haven’t spoken since.

“I think he believed me, but I don’t think it fits his narrative,” Ruby said. He’s not interested in another get-together. “Logic and truth just don’t matter at this point to that group.”

Sanders, a retired engineer, had started working as a school bus driver to comfort his daughter, who had been scared to get back on the bus after Aiden Clark’s death. He said he would be open to another meeting

because he believes he can show ways that the Haitians have hurt the city. “I can show you the detriments,” he said. “Show me the benefits.”

White supremacists arrive

Springfield’s growing tensions caught the attention of outside hate groups, seeking division to exploit.

White supremacist groups have been active in towns across the U.S. this summer, inserting themselves into hot-button debates over immigration, Gaza and gay rights, according to the Anti-Defamation League. These groups rallied in places like Tallahassee, Harrisburg, Pa., and Nashville, at times calling for deportation of immigrants.

On Aug. 10, a group wearing ski masks and carrying swastika flags and rifles marched in Springfield. The ADL identified them as Blood Tribe, which it describes as a growing neo-Nazi group claiming to have chapters across the U.S. and Canada.

On Aug. 27, during the routine public-comment portion of the Springfield City Commission meeting, a man identifying himself as a Blood Tribe member said: “I’ve come to bring a word of warning. Stop what you’re doing before it’s too late. Crime and savagery will only increase with every Haitian you bring in.”

Rue, the mayor, interrupted him, saying “You sound

threatening to me,” and asking police to peacefully remove him.

And recently, roughly 20 individuals claiming to represent the Proud Boys marched in the town.

Springfield NAACP President Denise Williams said residents are on edge from visits by the groups. “I’m saying to our people near and far to please stand down and don’t approach these guys—they are armed,” she said. “It’s quite dangerous.”

It goes national

Much of this had gone on without the rest of the U.S. noticing. That was about to change.

The cat-eating rumors, started with a post by a Springfield woman on a private Facebook page, turned out to be third-hand and were subsequently disavowed by the original poster, according to NewsGuard, a company that tracks online misinformation.

After Vance’s tweets on the morning of Sept. 10, Springfield Mayor Rue called a press conference that afternoon to try to contain the damage.

He also was faced that evening with the pain that Vance’s tweet was causing locally. Along with promoting the pet-eating rumor, Vance’s post had said a Springfield “child was murdered by a Haitian

migrant who had no right to be here.”

Nathan Clark, father of Aiden Clark, speaking at a City Commission meeting on Sept. 10. PHOTO: CITY OF SPRINGFIELD/ASSOCIATED PRESS

That night, Nathan Clark—the father of Aiden, the boy who had been killed in the bus crash—spoke during the public-comment portion of the Springfield City Commission meeting. Visibly shaking, he referenced GOP politicians, including Vance, and said they had used his son’s death “for political gain.”

“I wish that my son Aiden Clark was killed by a 60 year-old white man,” he said. “I bet you never thought anyone would ever say something so blunt.”

Hours later, Trump uttered the line that launched countless memes. He was called on it in the moment, when ABC debate moderator David Muir said his outlet had checked with Springfield’s city manager and found there were no credible reports of pets

being harmed by immigrants. Trump responded that the city manager would be expected to say that, but he'd seen people saying the opposite on TV.

"It is depressing as a fact checker," said Bill Adair, founder of the fact-checking website PolitiFact and a professor at Duke University. "We like to think that fact-checks will stop elected officials and candidates from repeating false claims or at least persuade people that these false claims have no truth to them."

But, he noted, "lying is really an economy. Politicians lie because they think it pays off."

The fallout

The morning after the debate, parents in Springfield kept their children home en masse. Several schools, City Hall and the state motor vehicle offices in Springfield were forced to evacuate after receiving bomb threats. The city canceled its two-day CultureFest celebrating diversity, arts and culture "in light of recent threats and safety concerns."

Blood Tribe took a victory lap for its presence in the town, boasting on Sept. 11, "We are on the ground in Springfield weekly—we even showed up to their City Council Meeting."

Vance, meanwhile, has continued to defend his claims.



Anna Kilgore's cat was missing—but returned. PHOTO: KRIS MAHER/WSJ

A Vance spokesperson on Tuesday provided The Wall Street Journal with a police report in which a resident had claimed her pet might have been taken by Haitian neighbors. But when a reporter went to Anna Kilgore's house Tuesday evening, she said her cat Miss Sassy, which went missing in late August, had actually returned a few days later—found safe in her own basement.

Kilgore, wearing a Trump shirt and hat, said she apologized to her Haitian neighbors with the help of her daughter and a mobile-phone translation app.

Vance has also added to his claims about Haitians, saying on social media that communicable diseases have been on the rise in Springfield because of the Haitian migration.

Information from the county health department, however, shows a decrease in infectious disease cases countywide, with 1,370 reported in 2023—the lowest since 2015. The tuberculosis case numbers in the county are so low (four in 2023, three in 2022, one in 2021) that any little movement can bring a big percentage jump. HIV cases did increase to 31 in 2023, from 17 in 2022 and 12 in 2021. Overall, sexually transmitted infection cases decreased to 965 in 2023, the lowest since 2015.

On Monday, Rue and DeWine appeared together on the heels of a roundtable at which other Ohio mayors appeared in solidarity with Springfield.

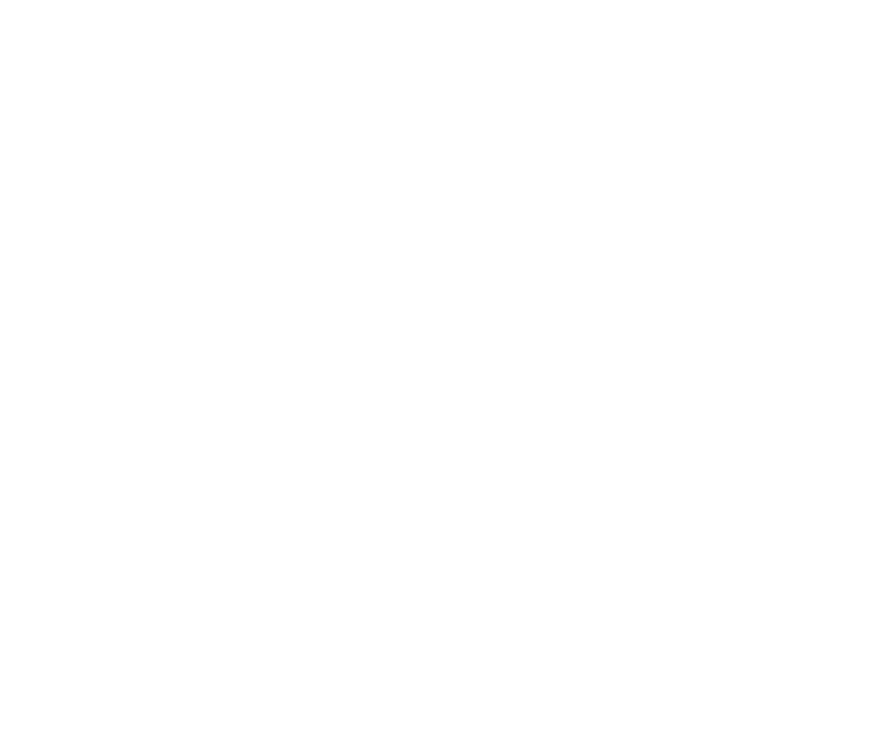
People watch as Springfield police investigate at City Hall after bomb threats were made against buildings on Sept. 12—part of a wave of threats after the pet-eating rumors exploded nationally.

PHOTO: ROBERTO SCHMIDT/AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE/GETTY IMAGES

The governor said some of the bomb threats were clearly meant to sow division, and originated from a

foreign country he didn't name. DeWine also said he has great affinity for the people of Haiti, which he has visited at least 25 times, most commonly in support of a school for poor children named after his late daughter Becky DeWine, who died in a car crash at age 22.

In recent days, many in Springfield have gone out of their way to show support for their Haitian neighbors, including by frequenting Haitian-run restaurants. Still, the local Haitian community is on edge.



Stanley Thelusma at Snyder Park. PHOTO: KRIS MAHER/WSJ

Stanley Thelusma, 24, who arrived in Springfield in July from Haiti, sought a peaceful spot at Snyder Park on Tuesday afternoon, studying a biology textbook on his iPad while people played pickleball and kids ran through a splash park nearby. He wasn't far from a pond where Haitians had been rumored to have taken some of the park's geese and slaughtered them, a rumor the state wildlife division found no basis for. Similarly, the mayor said the sheriff had

checked 11 months of 911 calls and found no evidence of animal abuse among the Haitian community.

Thelusma said he had hoped to continue his medical studies in Port-au-Prince but that he and his parents decided to come to Springfield because of the threat of gang violence. Now he is in a nursing degree program part-time at Clark State College and works four days a week as a forklift driver at an Amazon facility 30 minutes away, earning \$19.50 an hour.

“I don’t know why people are talking about immigrants eating cats, some pets,” he said. “It’s totally false.”

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